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JAMES AS A PHILOSOPHER¹

FIFTY years since, if competent judges were asked to name the American thinkers from whom there had come novel and notable and typical contributions to general philosophy, they could in reply mention only two men—Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson. For the conditions that determine a fair answer to the question, "Who are your representative American philosophers?" are obvious. The philosopher who can fitly represent the contribution of his nation to the world's treasury of philosophical ideas, must first be one who thinks for himself, fruitfully, with true independence, and with successful inventiveness, about problems of philosophy. And, secondly, he must be a man who gives utterance to philosophical ideas which are characteristic of some stage and of some aspect of the spiritual life of his own people. In Edwards and in Emerson, and only in these men, had these two conditions found their fulfilment, so far as our American civilization had yet expressed itself in the years that had preceded our civil war. Edwards, in his day, made articulate some of the great interests that had moulded our early religious life. The thoughts which he most discussed were indeed, in a sense, old, since they largely concerned a traditional theology. Yet both in theology and general philosophy, Edwards was an originator. For he actually rediscovered some of the world's profoundest ideas

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¹ Oration delivered on June 29 at the annual exercises of the Harvard Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.